

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 460 106

SP 040 457

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TITLE Substitute Teaching: A College Professor's Personal Experience.
PUB DATE 2001-00-00
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at Fitchburg State College (Fitchburg, MA, Fall 2001).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Faculty; Educational Quality; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Part Time Faculty; Preservice Teacher Education; Standardized Tests; *Substitute Teachers; Teacher Educators; *Teaching Conditions
IDENTIFIERS Massachusetts; Teaching to the Test

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on one Massachusetts teacher educator's work as a substitute teacher in local urban and suburban public schools. His goals were to assess diversity within today's classrooms, be better informed as a teacher educator, gain new clarity about teacher roles, understand the changing role of school administrators, and re-establish his credibility as a teacher of children and youth. Highlights of his experience included opportunities for self-assessment of his teaching skills and discovery of such facts as: teaching to the test was the priority in all classrooms, lack of collegiality was the norm, teacher-directed instruction predominated, differentiated instruction did not exist, and public schools struggled to meet the demanding federal and state legislative and regulatory changes. Schools were desperate to find good substitute teachers and often had to hire untrained, uncertified substitutes. Compensation for substitute teachers was very modest, with no fringe benefits. Classrooms included students with many varied abilities. The ever-increasing importance of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment was evident everywhere. Many school administrators were actively invisible. (SM)

Substitute Teaching: A College Professor's Personal Experience

By Ronald P. Colbert

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Presented at
Fitchburg State College
Fitchburg, MA

Fall 2001

Abstract

A professor of education spends time as an on-call substitute teacher in the local public schools. The paper reports on the teacher educator's effort to remain incognito while working in urban and suburban settings. General findings, travels and the personal challenges of the professor are shared.

The following graduate courses:

EDUC Seminar in Child Centered Issues
EDUC Literacy in Education
EDLM Foundations of Educational Administration
EDLM Cases and Concepts in Educational Administration
EDLM The Contemporary Leader

My depth of understanding of contemporary public schooling has been an asset in my college instruction. All my knowledge, skills and experiences as an educational practitioner have strengthened my ability to communicate the demands and rewards of teaching for our future teachers.

Currently, I have multiple responsibilities. I provide professional development and graduate coursework for practitioners; consult in school districts by analyzing the needs of children, teachers and families; read and review the current educational literature and profess “theory, research and best practice” to undergraduate and graduate students.

Through this experience, I returned to my roots in the public schools. Using site visits as a guest visitor and as an anonymous substitute teacher, I gathered data that enabled me to assess the diversity in today’s classroom.

My Personal Goals:

- To spend time conducting a personal self -assessment.
- To identify current practices in creative teaching and active learning in our public schools.
- To examine the atmosphere of collegiality, openness to ideas and esprit de corps in selected public schools
- To examine changes that are evident in the elementary school curriculum, instruction, technology and assessment since my leaving the role of a practitioner
- To identify the positive and negative implications and changes in public school education since my leaving the public school classroom
- To review curriculum and instruction in varied elementary and middle school settings
- To visit sites in other states and view instructional practices in these classrooms
- To examine what individual teachers are doing to implement changes in curriculum, instruction, technology and assessment based on MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment) results.
- To observe the roles, responsibilities of practicing principals and their interactions with teachers, children and youth.

Anticipated Results:

- ✓ To be better informed as a practicing teacher educator
- ✓ To disseminate to undergraduate and graduate students information about best practices
- ✓ To gain new clarity about the roles of today's teacher regarding instruction, curriculum, technology and assessment
- ✓ To understand the changing role of school administrators
- ✓ To re-establish my credibility as a teacher of children and youth

Strategic Requirements:

My main focus of interest was substitute teaching. I located work opportunities, established a credential, developed relationships in the schools, watched and listened to the teachers, students, administrators and people in schools and tried to make meaning out of this experience.

Site Selection:

In January, I applied as a substitute teacher to three school districts for day-to-day teaching. I particularly wanted locations that were urban and suburban, with emergent opportunities and diverse populations. I remained "incognito" for several reasons. The first was my need to avoid embarrassment if I failed as a substitute teacher. How could I ever go back and instruct a class of undergraduates in pedagogy and methods? My second reason was to avoid suspicion of motives by administrators. Was I there as a spy to report about their shortcomings? Lastly, I needed to move around schools informally. I wanted personnel to speak freely on their successes and frustrations with teaching.

Description of the Communities:

Urban, Massachusetts

The City of Lowell is the fourth largest city in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. It is strategically located at the intersections of Routes 495, 93 and 3. It provided excellent access for my travel to its schools.

The Merrimac Valley region's residents claim Lowell's National Park as this country's greatest tribute to the Industrial Revolution and the textile industry that boomed in New England in the 19th century. Today, the mill buildings complement an urban area of "change" where new growth and development is occurring with small and large companies. Lowell has a diverse population of 103,439 people. The city's workforce is computer literate and strongly supports the local public schools. The district recently completed ten new school buildings (seven elementary and three middle schools) and five

rehabilitations (four middle schools and one elementary). Lowell High School is currently undergoing a facelift worth 41 million dollars.

Lowell Public Schools is considered a premier urban school system in the Commonwealth. The system boasts a multi-million dollar commitment to upgrade its school's technological resources with computers and media centers. Lowell boasts a vibrant relationship with the University of Massachusetts Lowell and Middlesex Community College.

Suburban, Massachusetts

The Town of Tewksbury is a suburban community located in the low terrain and uplands of the Merrimac River, Concord River, Shawsheen River and Ipswich River and is surrounded by the suburban communities of Andover, Wilmington, and Billerica. The community's original economic base depended on farming and lumbering, today it has grown from agriculture to a complex of high tech business, small business, and commercial enterprises. The population of Tewksbury is 27,266. The community is situated near Interstate Routes 93 and 495, which makes for an ideal bedroom community for a greater Boston workforce.

The school system has completed the construction of a new middle school, rehabilitation of the high school and is currently rehabilitating a second middle school. Four elementary schools support the system and they were constructed in the early 1960s.

Urban, Massachusetts

Lawrence is an old industrial city on the Merrimack River. The city is located 25 miles north of Boston on interstate route 495 and 93. Its neighboring communities are North Andover, Andover, Tewksbury, Haverhill, and communities in southern New Hampshire. Lawrence seeks to improve its economic and business vitality by promoting its accessibility along with its diversity. It prides itself with adaptable and affordable manufacturing space. Businesses such as Malden Mills, KGR, Inc., Grieco Brothers, New Balance, and Cardinal Shoe are the major manufacturing employers.

The population of 70,207 is largely Hispanic and has given a Latino slant to the local economy.

From time to time, the public schools have made the news headlines for wrong reasons. The district has had some leadership and financial problems. On a positive note, there are significant numbers of English Language Learners in both general and special education classes. The schools promote a standards-based curriculum in the 21 schools. The school department is faced with the challenges of older buildings but has recently constructed a new school and is excited about future construction.

The Application Process:

Lowell and Lawrence school districts had personnel offices that provided me with application paper work. Tewksbury Public Schools utilized a Temporary Employment Agency for hiring substitute teachers.

Lowell had the most demanding application process, including a comprehensive questionnaire, which authorized work related and personal reference checks that included a search for criminal history, and drug free notification. Resume, references, and transcripts were required. Although substitute training was available, I was never required to attend.

Lawrence presented a similar comprehensive application questionnaire. References and Transcript were required.

The Temporary Agency had the least demanding application process; it did include references and transcripts. However, I worked for several days without submitting the application. Based on a telephone call as to my availability I was provided with immediate employment.

In completing all application processes, I was honest but was not forthcoming with information. I provided a current Massachusetts teacher license, transcripts from Bachelors and Master's degree programs, tuberculosis waiver and a minimal resume.

Non- Selective Sampling:

Substitute teaching permitted me an opportunity to conduct random observations at school sites. The sample had little or no choice because of teacher absence. I saw a variety of school personnel, places, and events. I observed "everything" and because of my substitute status, I had no restrictions placed on me while working in a building. I had encounters with parents, custodians, para-professionals, administrators, teachers, and children. Although my interactions did not span a great deal of time, they did yield some considerable and new understandings that will make me a better teacher of teachers.

Employment Record

The Lowell Public Schools and the Tewksbury Public Schools were receptive and welcoming to my being a member of the day-to-day teaching force. Morning calls at 6:15 am were made by both systems. The caller would make a request for my availability and provide me with the school location, grade, and subject matter.

I worked in the Lowell Public Schools and the Tewksbury Public Schools in a variety of capacities including;

Classroom teacher grades 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8
Physical educator grades Pre-K--6,

Paraprofessional in grade 3
Inclusion teacher grade 6
Special Education resource room teacher grade 6
Grade 7 English
Grade 7 Social Studies
Grade 7 Mathematics
Grade 8 English
Grade 8 Social Studies
Grade 8 Mathematics
MCAS Examination proctor and
Guidance office assistant.

On two occasions in early April, I was invited to interview with the Lawrence Public Schools. I was offered long-term teaching positions at both schools.

Position #1 was for a K-5 literacy educator. I would serve as an itinerant teacher in the elementary building and be responsible for a scripted, developmental reading program.

Position #2 was for a long-term eighth grade mathematics teacher.

Building administrators conducted the interviews. The interview process was short. The building administrators did not ask any specialized questions about experience, teaching, curriculum, and behavior management, knowledge of frameworks, MCAS or philosophy. The conversation focused on persuading me to accept the temporary positions. I was offered the positions. Both administrators asked, "When can you start?" I declined both opportunities so that I could be free to explore districts.

I also believed that the eighth grade youngsters deserved a middle school certified teacher of mathematics. Although I hold current certification as a teacher (K-8) my teaching experience was not significant in mathematics. Needless to say, I did not get called for day-to-day work in Lawrence.

Strategies Utilized:

Watching, listening and thinking were great "input" experiences. I took advantage of these during my substitute status to make initial observations and impressions. I worked to be sensitive and appreciate the way the schools operate. I made efforts to show people that were hosting me that I appreciated their work. I left thank you notes to each absent teacher.

They were the insiders responsible for the instruction of their children, and I did not want to bring my position as an instructor of teachers to these times and places. While I was in the schools, I did repress my past teaching experiences and "played the game." I asked for help and guidance in daily routines and sought out neighboring classroom teachers for support.

The substitute position allowed me many wonderful opportunities to observe from the outside; for example during lunch time in the faculty lounge, I could observe staff during informal discussions in their natural setting. I enjoyed a passive presence when I served as an aide for a twenty-two year old teacher. She requested that I prepare material for her classroom needs. As an inclusion teacher, I was permitted "limited interaction" with students. I rarely had the opportunity to interact within the classroom. I was a monitor but acted personable, interacted appropriately and was useful but not intruding while instruction was lead by the teacher of record. There were many other times when I was in active control of the classrooms, children and curriculum. During these times my observations were participatory, as I was the teacher or co-worker.

Many days I felt like an eavesdropper. I rarely had to elicit information about schools, people, children, etc. Information was given without awareness of my presence. I learned to have casual conversations and how to ask a few questions without giving my purpose and identity away.

Recording Information Learned:

For this experience I wrote thoughts in a computer diary, collected school handouts and bulletins and read everything on site. During my thinking I often wrestled with what occurred to me during the day. This helped me to logically discuss my experiences with friends, family and colleagues.

Highlights of the Experience

Self-Assessment

Substitute teaching allowed opportunities for self-appraisal of my teaching skills and many on-the-spot chances to note if my skills had become obsolete for the current needs of children, public schools and families. Over the last twelve years, varied societal changes have presented themselves in our public schools. I had changed careers when coming to work for Fitchburg State College.

I was apprehensive about substitute teaching. I knew from my many student teacher supervision experiences that all teachers operate their classrooms differently. The children of today are more culturally diverse and present different challenges. I also knew that some classes- special subjects, middle school, special education – are particularly difficult to fill with substitute teachers. There probably existed a dependable cadre of substitutes in a building and I understood I would be the new person. I expected hazard duty!

What I quickly learned was that the breadth of my experiences in my educational career did allow me to face the new challenges of teaching children and youth in 2001. I was confident. I must admit, on occasion I felt like a babysitter, a warm body, or a fill-in but I always knew that I was very well qualified, had strengths in pedagogical knowledge, and could manage a classroom. My credentials, experience and desire allowed me to do my best work each day. “The kids never scared me, they never had chalk fights or threw desks out windows and they learned something everyday!”

Current Practices, Creative Teaching and Active Learning

MCAS, MCAS, MCAS! If curriculum content is not focused on the MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment) test it does not get taught! Constructivist teaching and child-centered learning activities were rare. I cannot recall any units of study being taught in any classroom without a direct tie to the Curriculum Frameworks and Assessment. Student work relied on pencil paper responses. Things looked very common from room to room. Even school science fairs took on an MCAS critical thinking approach! There seemed to be little creative teaching. Teaching to the test was the priority in all classrooms.

In Physical Education the emphasis was active games. Cooperative, no win, life long activities were not evident. The specialist teacher was usually the free period for the classroom teacher. There seemed to be no carryover to the regular classroom. The procedure was ‘drop the kids’ and return late to pick them up.

Collegiality

The teacher absence was usually due to an unexpected personal or family illness, or emergency. My arrival was a surprise to colleagues. Many times there were less than cordial receptions. Principals and other teachers were busy and could not find time to greet or actively seek out the replacement teacher in the building. It was the school secretary or the custodian that would often direct or lead me to my classroom. Sometimes school handbooks, school rules, and lesson plan books were difficult to locate and I would have to seek out a colleague's support.

Teachers seemed "overloaded". Schools seemed like "All You Can Eat Buffets." Teachers complain they have had enough, yet they overload themselves with more and more responsibility. They can't help from taking MORE and it ends up hurting.

The workforce is aging and thinking about retirement. Their colleagues envy people who qualify for early retirement. "How many years do you have left?" seems like a more appropriate question for a prisoner in a jail cell rather than a teacher in a classroom. Yet this was common lunchroom conversation.

Curriculum, Instruction, Technology

Many times you "fly by the seat of your pants" as a substitute teacher. Different schools have different philosophies and varied instructional continuity. One school may be driven by whole language literacy and another by phonics based instruction.

An examination of teacher bookshelves in classrooms revealed that teachers in grades 4-7-8 utilized the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks for reference. The familiar state departments of education booklets were in view. MCAS student preparation guides and worksheets were evident in grades 4-7-8. On all occasions in these grade levels, emphasis on MCAS preparation was clear. In some locations, students had MCAS practice sessions each day.

Instruction for the most part was teacher directed. Students were exposed to a number of reading and writing assignments including many worksheets. Cooperative learning, project based learning, and collaborative grouping were not evidenced during my visits. Learning environments where students can talk to one another, assist one another and work in small groups were rare. On several occasions I revised the teacher plans to incorporate elements of instruction that involved group tasks and found the process to be successful for these learners. However, the management style was difficult for children and youth.

I did not witness differentiated instruction. In the middle school setting, classes were usually ability arranged by sections. Children with special needs were included in regular settings. Definitive, clear, and direct instruction by a special educator seemed rare. It appeared the classroom teacher was responsible for instruction and the special educator assumed a monitoring role. I did not witness inclusion specialists adapting the

special needs youngsters learning so they could be successful in the MCAS driven curriculum.

Computers, videotape recorders, televisions, overhead projectors were present in many classrooms. However, students in the varied classrooms rarely utilized computer technology. Many computers were not connected to the Internet. If the classroom had a connected computer, it was usually on the teacher's desk and required teacher password access. Schools did have extensive laboratory or library computers where software seemed monitored by librarians or tech teachers. Schools seemed to be working towards a 2003 mandate that requires districts to provide one computer for every five students. In discussions with students (even the youngest) it was evident that they were familiar with communication technology, search capabilities, databases, graphics, etc. Students seemed excited about technology and enthusiastic in discussions about using it. I was not sure if many teachers have found ways to incorporate technology into instruction without relying on it for skill games. It was evident that teachers were still learners of this new technology. Bulletin board notices announced in-district professional development opportunities for computer instruction. At this time, I would say that the technology was not utilized to its full extent.

Changes in the Public Schools

It was apparent that the public schools are striving and sometimes struggling to meet the demanding federal and state legislative and regulatory changes. In addition, professional development requirements in major curriculum areas, growing and diverse student populations, development of programs to accommodate special needs children, desires for grant funding, building and maintenance projects were priorities. Now add the debates by the questioning public and politicians. The agenda ahead is ambitious!

Schools are frantic to find good substitute teachers. Sadly, I witnessed untrained, non-certified teachers taking over classrooms. In one case, I was amazed at the hiring standards and surprised by the lack of qualifications and training that schools permitted. High schools students can substitute teach!

Compensation for substitute teachers seemed very modest. Pay ranged from a low of \$43.00 per day to a high of \$80.00. There are no fringe benefits, and no organized unions. Salary depended on the individual district with Lowell Public Schools at the high end.

Classrooms are comprised of students with many varied abilities. In every classroom some students did not learn as well as their classmates. Others did not seem to be challenged or engaged or had limited proficiency in English. As a substitute, I encountered students with a variety of strengths and needs. On many days the student needs outweighed the student strengths. At the middle level the passive aggressive behavior was most prominent during MCAS testing.

MCAS(Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment)

The ever increasing importance place on student performance on the MCAS was evident everywhere. It is the driving force in classrooms. Crucial test results!

School Administrators

Many school administrators were actively invisible. Middle school administrators (assistant principal's) did make classroom visits. It was obvious the purpose of a classroom visit was to check if I could "control" the classroom. I had no introduction or interaction with building administrators at the elementary level. At times I felt isolated and unappreciated as a substitute teacher. With no administrative feedback, how could I tell if my performance was acceptable? Didn't the principals care about what was occurring in these classrooms with their children?

Travel Adventures

Due to my substitute experiences I had a new drive to see something new. The freedom of a flexible schedule permitted me opportunities to visit some very interesting schools. These locations were dealing with similar issues facing the schools in the Commonwealth.

February Travel

Rationale:

During the last decade, many states like Massachusetts have begun using the results on statewide tests as a basis for rewarding individual students, teachers and schools. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts utilizes the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) to test students and hold districts and teachers accountable for achievement. The consequences and the political debate in Massachusetts have received much public attention. I was interested to learn how other states used high stakes tests and the impact on children.

Dallas, Texas:

I was invited by a colleague to visit the Highland Park Middle School in Dallas, Texas. I gained some insight into the Texas Test. The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) is a mandatory, statewide test of public schools students in reading, writing, and math. The test is administered in reading and mathematics in grades 3,4,5,6,7,8 and 10. Science is tested in grades 4,8,10 and Social Studies in grade 10. The TAAS holds schools accountable for results based on the state curriculum. Similar to our MCAS the results receive lots of publicity and students who do not pass the tenth grade exam do not graduate.

Like Massachusetts it was clear that there are critics and supporters of the test. The political atmosphere is very much like Massachusetts. The school principal was positive. During my visit I learned that the TAAS test results have improved over time, improvement for the white students increased with a wider margin than Hispanic and blacks, there is a growing gap between white and black and white and English as a Second Language students, school district cheating did occur, there are drill and kill worksheets and teachers do spend time teaching to the test, and significantly, the minority students have dropped out of school. However, the teachers and principal did report that during their tenure there have been some positive changes. There has been a reduction in class size, per pupil expenditure has increased, salaries improved, direct instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic returned to many classrooms and there is a greater use of technology in the classroom.

It was evident that there is pressure to improve scores and that some over zealous efforts are occurring in a state that offered early retirement incentives.

April Travel

Rationale:

Like the well-known public school inclusion efforts, the early childhood community has continued debate and dialogue on cross-age interaction in our daycare programs. A number of scholars have written about the social and intellectual benefits of mixed age groups in early childhood settings. However, local and state authorities and Massachusetts regulations stifle the flexibility of age grouping. This deprives both children and adults of the potential benefits.

Ryerson Early Learning Center, Toronto, Canada

The Ryerson Early Learning Center offers an exemplary model of family-centered childcare services, in order to provide experiential learning for students enrolled in the Early Childhood Degree program at Ryerson Polytechnic University, Toronto. The focus of the practices and research that occur at Ryerson is to include infants and toddlers with preschool and school age children in a licensed childcare center. Their alternative approach, that I enjoyed witnessing, placed all children in a learning environment with the mandated student teacher ratio. There was tremendous social and collaborative learning in the classrooms. The varied safety concerns for infants being with school age children was addressed. The high staff education and community collaboration was evident. The units of study were responsive to children's needs and the classrooms seemed to be more nurturing and less combative. Policies in Massachusetts would prevent this type of pedagogical practice. Lillian Katz, Professor Emeritus, University of Illinois and past president of NAEYC has commented that multiage group advocates should request local variances or waivers to promote this approach "not from the desire to do something wrong but from the desire to do something right." I witnessed the Ryerson Center doing it right!

Rationale:

In 1997, the Ministry of Education in Ontario, Canada published new curriculum frameworks for elementary students. The new curriculum specifically identifies the knowledge and skills that students are expected to acquire. St. Paul's School is a poor, urban k-8 school that did not fare well in testing and has made an action plan to strongly integrate the new language arts curriculum into their program.

St Paul's Catholic School

Toronto, Canada

The school located at its present site since 1959, currently is situated in proximity to a large government housing project. Although it is a catholic school, the children in attendance are not necessarily of that faith. The population of the school of 304 Pre-k-8 children. The majority of the children were non-white. The school offers many programs similar to that of urban schools in the United States. Breakfast program, safe arrival program, peace and mediation strategies, special education and gifted education programs, English as a Second Language, pre-junior Kindergarten (Headstart), instrumental music (steel pan band) and access to technology.

The schools in Toronto are faced with similar issues that we face in Massachusetts. New curriculum frameworks and assessment. St. Paul's supports the premise that "assessment results challenge us to evaluate where we are, against where we want to be. They hold up a mirror to performance and they demand effective and timely response. By celebrating victories and confronting weaknesses, we can develop strategies and make decisions that will improve learning for every student."

This visit provided an opportunity to see the "action planning" that the local principal has established for language arts literacy based on test results in the year 2000. It was evidenced that direct and intensive instruction was occurring in this school. The involvement of students in learning because of motivation and self-esteem initiatives was noticeable.

May Travel

Rationale:

The Auburn Early Education Center was the recipient of a 1999 United States Department of Education Blue Ribbon School. The school is noted for its constructivist approach to early childhood education. It has a strong partnership with Auburn University.

Auburn Early Education Center

Auburn, Alabama

This school for young children was one of the most remarkable places that I have ever observed. The facility was alive with university interns, college faculty, parents, teachers and many young children. It was an aesthetically beautiful building that was designed for

young children. Classrooms environments were colorful and children were immersed in activities. The school practiced a thematic/integrated curriculum that allowed children and teachers flexibility in presentation of knowledge and skills. There were tremendous learning center areas. Children were enjoying opportunities to explore by the use of a project approach. All PODS were busy in the study of varied countries around the world. Each classroom represented a country and it was a marvelous tour. I witnessed pre-service teachers and practitioners consulting with each other and facilitating and encouraging children during active learning. "This school has put the constructivist theory, Piaget, and others into practice."

Loachapoka Elementary School

Loachapoka, Alabama

Loachapoka Elementary School was located in rural Mississippi. A small farming community with the local elementary and junior/senior high school sharing a construction location. The school's population was significantly African American. Building principals and teachers knew all the children and families that lived in the community. The school considered by locals interviewed reported it to be good. Direct instruction of phonics and reading was evident in each elementary classroom. The school made homogenous reading groups in grades 1-6 and all children participated in direct instruction at their diagnosed reading level. Teachers were young in age and enthusiastic in appearance. Structure was evident throughout the building. The school's struggle with performance on standardized state mandated testing and ways to raise student performance was rising.

Of note was a collaborative project with the University of Mississippi. The school had a fishpond and grew and harvested a local fish for eating. The fish-farming project was a proud highlight of my tour.

Conclusion and Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the faculty and staff who work with children and youth everyday. Thanks to the fine folks that I interacted with in Lowell and Tewksbury Public Schools. Teachers are the mainstay of education in the Commonwealth. They unknowingly shared with me many insights into the working of public schools in 2001. I witnessed teachers who continually strived to be dedicated and sought to insure that students receive the best possible education.

I appreciate the teachers and administrators that welcomed me to their schools in Canada, Texas and Mississippi. I benefited by this travel.

My experiences in the schools renewed my belief that I am returning to my college teaching refreshed and up to the arduous task of preparing today's undergraduates for the ever-changing challenges of teaching. By substitute teaching, I proved to myself that even after a 12-year absence, I still could make connections to children, adapt curriculum and impart a love of learning. Understanding and managing the dynamics of the classroom are still priorities for successful teaching. In returning to my students at Fitchburg State College, I will be able to impart this knowledge due to my continued successful experiences.

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